

Mid-Region Council of Governments

agribusiness connection

connecting farmers and markets in central New Mexico

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Information about the Task Force, its meetings, public events, and local agriculture issues can also be found at

AGBZ.NET

Selling to APS: a First Hand Account

In the last issue of Agribusiness Connection, the lead article was on opportunities to sell local produce to the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS). Here's a report of one farmer's experience.

After attending the APS Produce Workshop in June, Roger Nagel of Hidden Arbor Farms decided he wanted to sell to APS. He contacted Priscilla Saavedra, APS buyer, filled out and submitted the registration forms, and was awarded a contract for green tomatoes at \$3 per pound. Unfortunately, Nagel was unable to fill the order due to weather conditions. In the process, however, Hidden Arbor Farms became a registered APS vendor.

In addition to APS catering, Kids Cook, and Kids Cook Tasting programs, two other

programs are eager to have products from local vendors. One is the Van Buren Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program. Funded by USDA, it provides free fruits and vegetables to



mid-school kids. The other is a salad tasting occurring at five elementary schools next spring. While both programs need 600 servings, the quantity is smaller than that needed for the regular food service programs and, therefore, easier for local producers to supply.

Hidden Arbor Farms is a registered vendor until the next bid cycle begins on July 1, 2007. If you are interested in selling to APS, now is a good time to get registered.

Bids are due before 11:00 AM on the last Thursday of each month. If you are interested, contact Priscilla Saavedra to request a registration form and a produce bid.

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Legislature to Consider Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program

If at first you don't succeed try, try again! That's just what farmers and senior advocates are doing in their drive to pass a bill to fund a pilot program to provide low-income seniors with food coupons for farmers' markets.

Under this bill, low-income seniors in Bernalillo, Socorro, San Juan, Grant, Valencia, Mora and Curry Counties would be issued food coupons of up to \$40 per season to spend at farmers' markets. \$250,000 from the State's General Fund is needed to fund the proposal.

Seniors whose income falls below 130% of poverty (an

annual income of roughly \$12,700 for one person or \$17,000 for a family of two) and who are already on the federal commodity program would qualify for the coupons.

When the same bill was passed by the legislature last year, it fell victim to the Governor's veto pen. "We've started early this year, and we're optimistic we can succeed," said Pam Roy, who last year lobbied the bill for Farm to Table.

Sponsors of the bill this year are Rep. Don Tripp (Socorro) and Sen. Ben Altamirano (Senate President Pro-

Tempore, Silver City).

Find out how to contact your legislator on behalf of this bill by contacting Denise Miller, NM Farmers' Market Association at (505) 983-4010.

Another Bill

Rep. Bobby Gonzales, of Taos will also introduce an appropriations bill for \$1.4 million for the New Mexico Department of Agriculture to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables for school lunches. Pam Roy, of Farm to Table and the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council, has more information on these bills and what you can do to help. Call her at (505) 473-1004.

Selling to APS: A First Hand Account

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Indicate on the bid the type of produce you can provide and pricing. Priscilla will issue a seasonal produce contract, assign a vendor number, register you with accounts payable, and set you up as a seasonal vendor for the rest of the year.

It is important to realize that APS requires all produce vendors to have proof of

product liability insurance. Producers who are interested in selling to APS and don't have insurance can join the Apple Council and participate in that organization's program. The cost of membership is \$50. For more information, contact Craig Mapel at (505) 852-3088.

Want to hear more about Roger Nagel's experiences?

Feel free to contact him at hiddenarborfarms@msn.com or at (505) 898-2558.

APS CONTACT

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From Farm to Supermarket

La Montanita Co-op Gets Behind the Wheel to Solve Transportation Dilemma

For small farmers in the region, getting crops to market can present a problem. And when local producers can't cover the freight, or if the cost of fuel becomes too high, there's the dilemma: Why grow what you can't sell? La Montanita Food Co-op, which now has stores in Santa Fe and Gallup, has stepped up to the plate by providing an alternative.

The Co-op, using a leased refrigerated truck, now picks up produce from farms ranging from Southern Colorado to the Mesilla Valley, and delivers it to their own stores as well as to Whole Foods, Raley's, Los Poblanos Organics and Cid's in Taos. Deliveries are usually made to food stores within 24 hours (compare that to the national distribution system where it takes much longer to go from farm to table!).

"Our customers have told us they value local products," says C.E. Pugh, general manager at La Montanita Co-op. "But we've had trouble ensuring an adequate supply."



A truckload of fresh produce from small farming operations from Southern Colorado to the Mesilla Valley arrives at La Montanita Co-op. Pictured is driver Brian Thomas Bailey.

Investing in the truck has paid off in efficiency, increased volume and farmer response. "Last year at this time," said Pugh, opening a spreadsheet on his computer, "we shipped \$28,000 worth of produce and eggs. This year we've shipped \$108,000."

Next year, La Montanita will lease a warehouse in Albuquerque. "This might enable local growers in the South Valley to bring their crops directly to the warehouse," said Pugh.

For the next few years, the truck will not be a money-making proposition for the Co-op. "We're willing to take a risk and invest in this because we believe that acting together with other retail stores in this way we can increase local production and build a sustainable regional food system," said Pugh.

And ultimately, that's a formula for happy customers as well!

EBT Pilot Program in Store for Farmers' Markets



The state's Human Services Department (HSD) and the New Mexico Farmers' Market Association (NMFMA) are teaming up to facilitate the use of food stamps at farmers' markets, starting in the 2007 growing season.

As a result of a \$68,000 grant from the US Department of Agriculture obtained by Denise Miller, Director of the of the Farmers' Market Association, HSD will begin supplying point-of-sale machines to farmers' markets in Socorro, San Juan, Mora, Grant and Curry Counties.

These machines will allow food stamp recipients to swipe their Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards and receive tokens that can be used at any of the booths at that farmers' market.

"If everything goes according to plan, nearly 100 vendors will participate in this pilot," says Wendy Chavez-Paez of HSD's Income Support Division's Benefit Delivery and Data Reporting Bureau. Conceivably, benefit transfer machines will eventually be installed at markets in the mid-state region, which has the largest population of food

stamp recipients.

WIC beneficiaries, mostly young mothers and their children, are already using coupons at local markets, and low-income seniors may soon follow (see front page). "All this increases sales at farmers' markets and also the health of our communities," says Miller.

Adds Chavez-Paez: "I'm thrilled to be working on this. It's a wonderful program. Low-income families get fresh food and the money goes back to farmers and stays in the community."

What Should I Plant? — Part 1

By Dr. Jeff Bader, Bernalillo County Extension Director

The vast majority of men die poor, not because their intentions were not right, but because their plans were not right. — Anonymous

This quote pretty much sums up what you need to think about when deciding what to do with that piece of irrigated land that you want to keep in agricultural production. In the next few newsletters, I will try to outline some things that you should consider before you plant those fields.

Deciding what you want out of the farm is the most important factor in deciding what to plant. This is true both for new farmers and for those who have been farming for some time. For instance, do you need the land to produce income for you to live on or just pay for itself? Do you want it to provide pasture for your livestock or just an aesthetically pleasing open-space? These are all valid agricultural uses of the land but require vastly different types and amounts of inputs.

Farming for your sole means of support is extremely difficult anywhere in the United States and is particularly difficult in areas with small tracts of very high value land such as the Middle Rio Grande Valley. High-value specialty crops are capable of very high gross returns per acre (notice I underlined gross) but require very high inputs.

These inputs include especially high levels of time, skill, determination, and resources. If you do choose the higher revenue yielding crops, you must:

- Do your homework:
Conduct a simple business analysis of your proposed farming enterprise. This includes writing a mission statement (yes, it is helpful), conducting a simple market analysis (identifying your customers, your markets, the prices you want and the demand for your product), and a basic breakeven analysis (cost of production, best-case/worse-case production scenarios, and required sales volume).
- Set priorities and goals
- Develop a comprehensive business/management plan
- Formally evaluate your progress

These processes should be committed to paper so you are accountable to yourself. Completing the first two bullets above should help you decide if you want to go forward with your idea or modify it before you develop a comprehensive business/management plan for the farm. If you have any specific questions, send them to me and I'll try to answer them in the next issue.

small farm
business planning
&
marketing
series

CONTACT

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CRAFTING YOUR MESSAGE...

Back in September the e-coli contamination of spinach was a lead story in the media. Local growers and Agribusiness Task Force Members Eric Garretson and Dan Schuster were interviewed on KUNM and were able to skillfully articulate the difference between the national food distribution system and our local farms.

Whatever the issue, from time to time, media representatives will contact local producers. Would you be prepared to respond? Here are some tips that might come in handy.

Garretson, market manager of the Albuquerque Downtown Growers' Market, points out that the media often tend to blow things out of proportion. "They

don't look at the crux of the issue. We need to help them refocus on local issues."

A press representative gives the following suggestions: Don't be afraid to speak. Try to help educate the reporter without worrying about sound bites. Don't go beyond your own knowledge or comfort level in conveying information. If there is something you don't know, refer them to an authority on the topic.

Producers need to be prepared to talk about their practices. The concept of "elevator speech" can help. Elevator speech is a short description of what you do, or the point you want to make, presented in the time it takes an elevator to go from the top floor

to the first floor or vice versa.

Joran Viers, of the Cooperative Extension Service, offers these suggestions: Be relaxed; think through your response. Create a warm and fuzzy story that includes family or ties what you do to the community.

Garretson feels that consumers should know where their food comes from. He urges growers to emphasize the benefits consumers get by purchasing from local producers.

"Differentiate your product from industrial farming. As a local producer, you have better control on a small farm, there are fewer handlers, the food has more flavor and nutrition, and it stays fresh longer!"



The recent tainted spinach scare brought growers in the media's spotlight. How comfortable would you be addressing the media?



For more tips on handling the media, google "talking to the press" or give us a call!

Meet the Farmers



Roxanne & Jimmy Wagner

Location of Farm:
Corrales

Meet the Farmers: Roxanne & Jimmy Wagner

Q How long have you been farming?

A (Jimmy) "Wagner Farms is a fourth generation family business. Growing up on the farm, I began farming the day I was old enough to hold a hoe. I actually made the decision to pursue farming as a career about 25 years ago."

Q What influenced your decision to start a full time retail operation?

A (Jimmy) "My grandfather loved farming, people loved and sought out what he produced, and it just continued from there. We have seen through the years that direct marketing can be more profitable for the farmer because you can have more control over what you grow and the price you can get for your crop. In addition, we find it very gratifying to have contact with our satisfied customers."

Q Your stand is a visible reminder of the agricultural activity in our area. What are other ways that you think would be helpful to promote agriculture in the Albuquerque region?

A "We think that the growers' markets are doing a great job as more and more consumers are looking for a direct connection to the source of their

food supply. (...) we also feel that it is important to connect people with an experience. Every year, we host thousands of people from all age groups and provide them with an opportunity to visit a real working farm (where they can) meet and talk with the farmer, sit in on an educational lecture about farming, and actually walk through and pick from the fields. Visitors (...) who have little or no contact with agriculture leave with a better understanding of where their food comes from and what it takes to grow it. This gives people a completely new appreciation and support for agriculture and who knows, during one of these visits a child may decide that farming is what they want to do, carrying on the tradition."

Q What would be most helpful to you to expand your business?

A "The growing population around the area has brought us many new customers, which has been great but, as development spreads across the river valley, our farmland treasures are vanishing. At this point, what would be most helpful to us is to get more land that would be dedicated to preserving, sharing, and protecting our area's agricultural heritage."

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